In the debate over how to stop nuclear proliferation, both sides make increasingly untenable assumptions. The advocates of “regime change” in North Korea and Iran underestimate the staying power of the political systems in Pyongyang and Tehran. Proponents of negotiated settlements exaggerate what can be achieved by offering economic incentives and security guarantees in return for denuclearization. Both ignore the overarching issue that would have to be seriously addressed in order to prevent further proliferation: Why should other countries forswear the nuclear option if the existing nuclear powers are upgrading their nuclear weapons, talk openly of using them in future wars, and no longer give even lip service to the goal of phasing out nuclear armament that was enshrined in Article Six of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)?

The urgent need for a new non-proliferation policy is underscored not only by the ongoing development of the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, as such, but also by the resulting danger of regional nuclear arms races in Northeast Asia and the Middle East–Persian Gulf region. Popular support for nuclear weapons is growing in Japan, bringing to the surface sublimated pro-nuclear sentiment in South Korea. The stalemate with Iran is strengthening pro-nuclear hawks in Saudi Arabia, which has nascent nuclear links with Pakistan. Although Israel, at the behest of the United States, has never conducted a nuclear test or formally acknowledged the existence of its Dimona reactor, the widespread assumption that it has some 200 “bombs in the basement” is an ever-present source of anxiety to its neighbors.

To counter the growing international belief that further proliferation is inevitable, what is needed is a new nuclear bargain in which realistic negotiations with Pyongyang and Tehran are linked with a parallel process of global nuclear weapons reductions, starting with U.S.-Russian reductions that pick up from the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreements of the Cold War years and the stopgap Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) accord of 2002. But such a process, in itself, will not do much to stop proliferation over time unless it is accompanied by a series of steps to delegitimize nuclear weapons by all eight existing nuclear powers.

Delegitimization, to be meaningful, would require far-reaching initiatives at both the declaratory and operational levels. First, all eight existing nuclear powers would have to pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. China and India have made such “no first use” pledges, but the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and Pakistan refuse to do so, and the U.S. National Security Doctrine of 2002, reaffirmed in 2005, explicitly asserts the right of preemptive war against potential adversaries. At the operational level, the United States and Russia would no longer keep their strategic nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, and the United States would withdraw its tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.
Finally, the United States would seek to replace its nuclear umbrellas over the Korean peninsula and Japan with regional nuclear-free zone agreements and would end its opposition to the already-declared nuclear-free zone in Southeast Asia.

Proposals for “no first use” pledges and nuclear-free zones are generally dismissed as the naïve dreams of do-gooders who do not understand the harsh realities of a dangerous world. But the harsh reality in dealing with non-proliferation is that the egocentric policies pursued by the United States have not worked in the past, and will not work in the future, because they ignore the political and psychological realities that drive proliferation.

It is often argued that proliferation would continue even if existing nuclear arsenals were completely phased out. The countries that want nuclear weapons, it is said, want them because they face real or perceived threats to their security from global or regional adversaries. To be sure, would-be nuclear powers are indeed seeking security. Both Iran and North Korea have accelerated their quest for nuclear weapons because the Bush administration has threatened regime change and preemptive war. Iran started to pursue the nuclear option in part because Israel had nuclear weapons and because it feared Iraq would get them.

But let us suppose that the White House stops threatening preemption. Suppose that the United States negotiates economic incentives, normalized relations, and security assurances with North Korea and Iran. Would that be enough to bring a definitive end to their nuclear weapons programs? Negotiations are necessary to test their intentions, but the testing is likely to produce inconclusive outcomes. North Korea might well agree to an updated version of the 1994 plutonium freeze agreement with the United States that was abrogated by the Bush administration in 2002. Iran might well agree to a verifiable freeze of weapons-grade uranium enrichment in return for concessions addressed to its regional security concerns, such as a freeze of Israel’s Dimona reactor. But neither of them is likely to abandon its nuclear weapons option, for good, until the existing nuclear powers begin a credible process of global nuclear arms reductions that will give the necessary political cover to North Korean and Iranian leaders who both depend on domestic alliances with nationalistic military factions that want nuclear weapons.

At the very least, to make any security assurances to Iran and North Korea credible, the United States would have to join in supporting regional nuclear-free zones. “Hard” security considerations alone are sufficient to explain why this is so. Security assurances given to North Korea and Iran would be meaningless in the context of U.S. security commitments to South Korea and Israel that do not preclude the use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, to understand why nuclear disarmament is necessary, national pride, a “soft” factor of incalculable importance, must also be added to the equation, even though it cannot be quantified like nuclear warheads.

In the case of Korea, Koreans both North and South feel that they have been historically victimized by great powers. Their shared ethos of victimization, known as han, gives them a hunger for national status and respect that has been strengthened by the Cold War division of Korea into two states, which they blame primarily on the United States. For Kim Jong Il, claiming the status of a “nuclear weapons state” is popular with his armed forces, who think of themselves as the guardian of national honor, and feeds the national pride of Koreans in the North and South alike who admire him for standing up to the United States.

In Iran, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi started the nuclear program 32 years ago as part of a broader effort to establish himself as a nationalist modernizer who would restore the position of regional preeminence that Tehran had intermittently enjoyed in earlier centuries. To erase his image as a CIA-
installed U.S. puppet, the Shah continually appealed to Persian pride by evoking historical memories of past Persian empires and by developing ambitious military power projection capabilities.

To be sure, concern about what was then a nascent Israeli nuclear weapons program and the desire for civilian nuclear energy to supplement petroleum made the acquisition of advanced nuclear technology attractive. But the Shah wanted visible progress in nuclear development primarily to enhance his domestic political stature, I was told by Jafar Nadim, then undersecretary of foreign affairs, during a 1978 Tehran visit. It would be a symbol of Persian technological superiority over Arabs, Nadim said, and would "help us to get the respect we feel we deserve from you people. You should understand, we Persians have a very ancient, very advanced culture, yet we have been a victim of so many insults and invasions, and now we have to stand up."

After winning the presidency last year, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad quickly recognized that the nuclear weapons option could be utilized as an emotive symbol of national sovereignty. He has systematically exploited nationalist resentment of U.S. pressure on the nuclear issue to strengthen his position in dealing with the United States and to counter domestic political rivals.

In short, economic incentives, normalized relations, and formal security assurances are all necessary to get denuclearization started in both North Korea and Iran, but giving up the nuclear option entirely would undermine both Kim Jong Il and Ahmadinejad domestically, unless it is perceived as part of a global process in which nuclear weapons are being universally devalued and the United States is no longer using them to assert global dominance.

II.
Both in India, the most conspicuous failure of the non-proliferation regime, and in Japan, the most significant potential new member of the nuclear club, nationalistic hawks have mobilized support for nuclear weapons by appealing not only to security concerns but also to the national hunger for prestige and status in a world where nuclear weapons remain the ultimate status symbol.

It is often forgotten that New Delhi delayed its decision to develop nuclear weapons for 24 years after its 1974 test gave it the option of doing so. Throughout this period, pro-nuclear hawks centered in the Hindu nationalist right wing were kept at bay by the political heirs of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had persuaded the Indian political and military elite that the superpowers would eventually honor their Article Six commitment to pursue “negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.”

As it became increasingly clear that Washington and Moscow intended to maintain a nuclear-dominated world order, the hawks steadily gained ground, warning that India would remain a second-rate power unless it invoked its nuclear option. On June 9, 1988, Nehru’s grandson, the late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, hoping to contain the Hindu Right, made an extraordinary proposal at the United Nations. India and other potential nuclear weapons states would forgo nuclear weapons in exchange for a long-term commitment by the existing nuclear powers to phase out their nuclear weapons by 2010. Coincident with the conclusion of a timebound agreement for phased reductions, starting with a 50 percent cut in U.S. and Soviet arsenals, India and the other non-nuclear states would be committed immediately, under inspection, “not to cross the nuclear threshold.” It was the summary U.S. rejection of this offer that gave the initiative to the Hindu Right, setting the stage for India’s 1998 tests and its subsequent production of nuclear weapons.

Although Japan, unlike India, eventually signed and ratified the NPT, it did so...
only after dragging its feet for a decade. When Washington first submitted the projected treaty to Tokyo in 1966, Vice Foreign Minister Takeso Shimoda told a press conference that “Japan cannot agree to such a big power-centered approach, implying as it does that the nuclear powers would not be required to reduce their capabilities or stockpile, while the non-nuclear powers would be barred in this treaty from having nuclear weapons.”\(^3\) Japan was one of the last countries to sign the NPT in 1970 and ratified it six years later only after a protracted diplomatic struggle in which the United States finally accepted terms that in effect gave Japan a nuclear weapons option. Washington promised that it would help Tokyo to develop an autonomous fuel cycle, with independent plutonium reprocessing and uranium enrichment capabilities for its civilian nuclear power program. This promise was honored by the Nixon and Ford administrations in a series of temporary agreements, and in 1987, the Reagan administration concluded a 30-year accord that gave Japan blanket approval to reprocess U.S.-supplied reactor fuel.

During the Cold War, Japan, as a polite ally, did not question the inequitable structure of the NPT, except for occasional revealing statements by assertive pro-nuclear hawks, notably former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. In 1970, Nakasone, then director of the National Defense Agency, declared that the NPT is “primarily designed, even if covertly, to preempt both Japan and West Germany from acquiring nuclear arms and thereby undermining the basis of U.S.-Soviet nuclear hegemony.”\(^4\) Later, when the initial 25-year term of the NPT was scheduled to expire and the United States sought its indefinite and unconditional extension, Japan balked. At the 1993 Tokyo G7 summit, Japanese spokesman Yoshifumi Okamoto attacked the NPT as an “unequal treaty,” calling for steps to implement Article Six.\(^5\) Japan refused to accept inclusion of the word “unconditional” in the summit communiqué and only agreed at the last minute to support indefinite extension.

In November 1994, to the consternation of the United States, Japan introduced a little-noticed resolution at the United Nations urging the nuclear weapon states to “pursue negotiations on progressive and balanced reductions of nuclear weapons in the light of Article Six.”\(^6\) After two weeks of angry diplomatic exchanges, Tokyo attempted to appease Washington by deleting the references to “Article Six” and “negotiations,” but the United States abstained, along with North Korea and Cuba, when the resolution was adopted. Tokyo did finally go along with indefinite extension of the treaty after the 1995 review conference in New York adopted a declaration of “Principles and Objectives” that Japan co-sponsored in which the nuclear weapon states agreed to carry out Article Six “with determination” and to support the entry into force of the pending Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty “no later than 1996.”

The bitter struggle over extension in 1995 was intensified by the Clinton administration’s announced decision not to pursue further nuclear arms reductions with Russia even if the stalemate then prevailing with Moscow over implementation of the START II agreement could be resolved. At the next review conference in 2000, the mood grew even darker after the U.S. Senate’s rejection of the test ban treaty six months earlier. The United States headed off a stalemate only by pledging support for 13 incremental steps toward denuclearization, including renewed efforts to bring the test ban treaty into force, implementation of START II, negotiations on START III, and continued support for the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. But the incoming Bush administration soon made clear that it would not carry out the “Thirteen Steps” when it abrogated the ABM Treaty, thus invalidating key provisions of START II; it reaffirmed its opposition to the test ban, and proclaimed its readiness to wage preemptive war with
nuclear weapons, if necessary, in the name of preventing proliferation.

On the eve of the 2005 review conference, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warned that “a continued failure to take the Thirteen Steps seriously could...inspire even greater resistance by the non-nuclear states to new measures to strengthen the non-proliferation regime and could undermine willingness to maintain the regime at all.” This warning was vindicated when the conference adjourned in confusion after failing to agree on a final statement. The Bush administration had shown its disdain for the NPT review process by sending as its representative a mid-level official who resisted all denuclearization initiatives, limited his few official utterances to condemnations of Iran and North Korea, and implied several times that the United States considered the “Thirteen Steps” obsolete.

III.

Until the present administration, successive U.S. presidents, starting with Richard Nixon, have genuflected to Article Six by negotiating limited reductions of nuclear weapons. Only one, Ronald Reagan, made a serious effort to negotiate their complete elimination. At the 1986 Reykjavik summit, Reagan and Gorbachev agreed on the concept of a ten-year phaseout, but Reagan’s caveat that the United States retain the right to continue developing the “Star Wars” missile defense system was unacceptable to Gorbachev. Clinton kept the door open for future reductions while maintaining the status quo and finessed the issue of what the United States would do when its existing nuclear warheads deteriorate.

By contrast, George W. Bush has taken a series of steps designed to make clear that the United States intends to maintain its nuclear arsenal at more or less present levels by replacing its ageing warheads with qualitatively better ones, and by developing new types of nuclear weapons suitable for an explicitly declared shift from “non-proliferation” to “counter-proliferation.” Some of these steps have received extensive media attention. One casualty of the media spotlight was the “bunker-buster,” a projected low-yield tactical nuclear weapon that would be capable of penetrating the buried underground nuclear redoubts believed to exist in North Korea. Congress has so far delayed the necessary funding.

Another widely-publicized change in nuclear weapons policy that could lead to pressure for renewed testing is the “Reliable Warhead Replacement Program,” which will replace old warheads with simpler and safer adaptations of existing designs. Congress has placed restrictions on the program to reduce the possibility that new designs will be developed. As the Economist asked, “How far can technicians go in redesigning parts for existing warheads before they end up building what are, in effect, new ones? How can anyone be sure the things will go bang when needed if they can’t be tested?”

A little-noticed but fundamental shift in U.S. nuclear policy during the Bush years has been what Morton H. Halperin and Ivo Daalder call the “conventionalizing” of U.S. nuclear forces. During the Cold War, the rationale for maintaining nuclear weapons was that they would deter a Soviet attack, making their actual use unnecessary. A rigid separation was maintained between conventional and nuclear forces. But in the Bush world view, since “rogue states” are “undeterrable,” military contingency plans must prepare for a variety of scenarios in which the use of nuclear weapons and the merger of conventional and nuclear forces will be required.

A revealing glimpse of such contingency plans surfaced in a draft of the Pentagon’s “Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations” that was posted on the Joint Chiefs of Staff website from late 2004 until October 2005, when it was publicized by Hans Christensen of the Federation of American Scientists and summarily withdrawn from the website.
The doctrine declared that “the use of nuclear weapons within a theater requires that nuclear and conventional plans be integrated to the greatest extent possible,” and that regional combat commanders may request presidential approval to deploy nuclear weapons against “an adversary using or intending to use WMD against U.S., multinational or alliance forces or civilian populations” (italics added).11

The growing reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. military strategy is steadily undermining the non-proliferation regime in two ways. First, North Korea and Iran, facing the threat of a U.S. preemptive strike, are responding by making redoubled efforts to develop their nuclear capabilities. Unlike Washington, which expects to come out on top in a nuclear exchange, they recognize their vulnerability in the face of superior U.S. power and can only hope that the United States will prove to be “deterrable.”

Second, as Keir A. Lieber of Notre Dame and Daryl G. Press of the University of Pennsylvania have demonstrated, the United States is seeking unchallengeable nuclear dominance not only over “rogue states,” but also over the other nuclear weapon states, which is stimulating a new nuclear arms race that makes the prospect of the nuclear weapons reductions envisaged in the NPT ever more distant.12

It was soon after the announcement of the U.S. “Reliable Warhead Replacement Program” that Russia disclosed its new submarine-launched Bulava I intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), its plans for bigger and better Borey-class submarines, its first deployments of mobile Topol-M land-based missiles, and its decision to resume the production of nuclear-capable Blackjack bombers.

The Pentagon’s latest annual report to Congress on Chinese military capabilities expressed surprise at “the pace and scope of the modernization of their strategic forces,” especially the projected addition of mobile DF-31A ICBMs with a 7,000 mile range and submarine-launched nuclear weapons to its existing silo-based forces. But it would have been more surprising if Beijing had not stepped up its nuclear buildup in the face of overt U.S. plans to weaponize space and to perfect weapons systems designed to destroy China’s nuclear forces and command and control infrastructure.

The impossibility of curbing proliferation effectively while seeking to preserve and strengthen U.S. nuclear primacy has been illustrated by the outcome of negotiations on both the test ban treaty, a key non-proliferation objective of previous administrations, and the proposed Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty, which seeks to cap fissile material stockpiles. Both are inequitable treaties, like the NPT, that would freeze the existing imbalances in the global nuclear power structure.

When the test ban treaty was signed by the Clinton administration, the United States had already conducted so many tests (1,050, compared to 45 for China and 6 by India) that it could stop without losing its nuclear dominance. Moreover, as India emphasized when it declined to sign, the treaty had loopholes that could be interpreted to permit low-yield tests, and both the United States and France are known to have the technical capacity to redesign their nuclear weapons without tests, using computer simulations that less-advanced countries have not yet mastered.

While maintaining the unilateral testing moratorium initiated by the Clinton White House, the Bush administration has rejected a test ban on the grounds that it is impossible to verify. At the same time, it has promoted a fissile materials cutoff, but has insisted on the same one-sided terms that have led to the failure of past negotiations on a cutoff treaty. The proposed treaty is inherently inequitable because it would leave some countries, notably the United States and Russia, with much bigger stockpiles after the cutoff than other potential
signatories. (For example, the United States had a combined total of 502.5 tons of plutonium and highly-enriched uranium at the end of 2003, while China had 31.5 tons and India 15.3 tons.) As one of the leaders of Japan’s nuclear industry, Ryukichi Imai, told me, “you ask others to do what you already do not need to do.”

In addition, the five countries classified in the NPT as “nuclear weapons states” (the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and China) are not required to place their civilian nuclear facilities under international safeguards and are free to shift fissile material from civilian to military purposes as desired. Past negotiations for a fissile materials cutoff have foundered over demands for a “non-discriminatory” accord in which all states would have to declare their weapons-grade fissile material stocks and agree to a schedule for the progressive transfer of these stocks to safeguards.

IV.

Taking stock of the successes and failures of the non-proliferation regime to date, it is clear that the NPT, as such, has not had as much to do with the successes as is often suggested. Countries signed the NPT, or refused to do so, for reasons specific to each case. Most of the 188 signatories are small, weak countries that never had any intention of developing nuclear weapons and signed mainly to please bigger powers on which they were dependent for aid and trade. Only one country, South Africa, succeeded in developing a nuclear weapons capability and later abandoned it. New research shows that it did so not in response to international pressure but mainly because the South African armed forces wanted the funds being spent on the nuclear program to modernize their antiquated conventional forces. Conversely, Argentina and Brazil scaled down nuclear programs that had been started by military-dominated regimes because civilian governments attached greater importance to non-military priorities.

Egypt, Syria, and Turkey needed foreign technical and financial help to fulfill their nuclear ambitions and were unable to get it. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine turned over their Soviet-installed nuclear facilities to Russia after independence, only after receiving substantial economic rewards and security guarantees. Significantly, many of these nine countries, together with Canada, Germany, Japan, and Sweden—all of which ended nuclear programs that would have given them a military nuclear option—have been the most vocal critics of the nuclear “haves” for their failure to implement Article Six.

Why did Libya give up its nuclear weapons program?

First, because Muammar El-Qaddafi needed the economic quid pro quos offered by the United States in order to stay in power. Economic distress had led to urban riots, two military coup attempts, and an Islamic insurgency in the eastern provinces.

Second, Qaddafi had lost confidence that the program would succeed. As Mohamed ElBaradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), observed, Libya’s nuclear program was “in the very initial stages of development” when it was discontinued and was beset by major technical difficulties. To be sure, Qaddafi tried to short-cut the process by buying parts for a uranium enrichment plant through the smuggling network operated by Pakistan’s nuclear czar, A. Q. Khan, but Khan proved able to supply only 15 percent of the required parts. Libya did not have the technology needed to make the rest of the parts itself.

While economic incentives were critical in the case of Libya, it does not follow that they would be sufficient to end the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran unless their security concerns are addressed and, more important, unless there is progress toward global disarmament. Kim Jong Il does not face the direct threats to his power that Qaddafi did, and his nuclear program,
developed with Soviet help, was already far advanced when Libya's was just starting. Iran does not need a deal with the West to operate its oil fields, as Libya did, and has major power ambitions that Libya never had, even in Qaddafi’s heyday.

The most important test cases for the NPT from the start have been three big countries with historically rooted ambitions for major power status, India, Iran, and Japan. As U.S. allies at the time, both Iran and Japan did sign, but Washington won a Pyrrhic victory in the case of Japan by giving it a nuclear weapons option. Only one other country, Britain, has received U.S. help in developing an autonomous fuel cycle. For India, with a population greater than that of Europe or Africa, the privileged position given in the NPT to the five charter members of the nuclear club was intolerable—especially since China, which had tested in 1964, was one of the five. Still, as the 1988 Rajiv Gandhi initiative showed, India might not have gone from a “recessed” deterrent to operational nuclear weapons if the “haves” had shown greater respect for Article Six.

Despite its inequities, the NPT has been important as a symbol of the global aspiration for a nuclear-free world, and its central provision, Article Six, is the necessary starting point for a renewed effort to curb proliferation. The Nuclear Suppliers Group and the IAEA, which implement the goals of the NPT, will continue to play a central role in this effort. To curb proliferation effectively, however, the NPT regime must now address the reduction and delegitimization of existing nuclear weapons, and this will require adapting to the reality that three new de facto nuclear weapons states, India, Pakistan, and Israel, have joined the nuclear club.

Revising the treaty to take this new reality into account would be a daunting diplomatic task in a review conference of 188 delegates. A simpler and more promising way to update the non-proliferation regime would be to construct a new negotiating structure under UN auspices in which both de jure and de facto nuclear weapons states would seek to orchestrate a coordinated strategy that links the non-proliferation regime with steps toward nuclear disarmament.

The United States implicitly recognized India as a nuclear weapons state by agreeing to the separation of its civilian and military nuclear facilities in its proposed civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with New Delhi, now before Congress. As IAEA director Mohamed ElBaradei has observed, this agreement would serve non-proliferation goals because it would bring all of India’s existing and projected civilian reactors under international safeguards.

India has scrupulously observed Article One of the NPT, barring the transfer of nuclear technology, in contrast with Pakistan, which operated a nuclear Wal-Mart during the tenure of A. Q. Khan as its nuclear czar. Thus, the United States should not make civilian nuclear technology available to Pakistan at present, but should give implicit recognition to both Pakistan and Israel as de facto nuclear powers by inviting them, along with India, to join with the five de jure nuclear weapons states in the UN negotiations on implementing Article Six. North Korea could also be brought into the discussions when and if it is definitively established that it possesses nuclear weapons. Israel would be reluctant to acknowledge its nuclear weapons capabilities, but forcing it to do so would be an essential precondition for negotiating any Middle East–Persian Gulf security arrangements.

The de facto nuclear powers would be committed from the outset to making reductions in their arsenals after reductions by the de jure nuclear powers have reached an agreed level. Only with such an all-embracing approach will the de jure nuclear powers feel that it is safe to wind down their nuclear stockpiles, and only when the prospect of meaningful nuclear disarmament becomes
credible will would-be nuclear powers re-assess their ambitions.

V.

In August 2006, the United States had a grand total of 10,104 nuclear warheads and Russia some 16,000, counting both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, and both operational weapons and weapons in reserve. How far and how fast to go in reducing this stockpile has been discussed in a variety of expert technical studies. Many of these envisage a series of staged U.S. and Russian reductions to start the process that would stretch out over many years.

An authoritative proposal that would have a more direct impact in stopping proliferation has been presented by Sidney D. Drell and James E. Goodby in their Arms Control Association study, What Are Nuclear Weapons For? By 2010, the United States and Russia would each reduce their arsenals to a level of 500 operationally deployed nuclear warheads, plus a “Responsive Force” of 500 reserve warheads. The SORT agreement of 2002 committed the two countries to reductions to a level of 1,700–2,200 operationally deployed nuclear warheads by 2012, but it failed to define what was to be counted in these aggregates, did not preclude increased levels after 2012, and did not apply to warheads held in reserve, which could be increased in number.

Drell and Goodby do define what should be covered, explicitly limiting operational deployments to three Trident submarines on station at sea, 100 Minuteman III ICBMs in hardened silos, and 25 B-2 and B-52H bombers configured for gravity bombs or air-launched cruise missiles. Within a decade, they envisage a further reduction of operational warheads to 250, together with the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons.

Although Russia has more tactical nuclear weapons than the United States, none are known to be deployed outside its borders, while the United States still deploys some 480 air-deliverable tactical nuclear weapons in NATO countries, most of them in Germany, and some on air bases in Belgium, Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. During the 2005 German election campaign, three leading political parties, the Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats, called on the United States to withdraw all remaining nuclear warheads as “a relic of the cold war.”

The continued deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe reflects the same lingering Cold War mindset that explains the Pentagon’s reluctance to rule out the first use of nuclear weapons globally against conventional forces. Since 1998, Germany has urged NATO to adopt a “no first use” policy. As its former foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, pointed out, “the first use policy was a response to a situation that has fundamentally changed. There are no longer Soviet tank divisions along our border. Moreover, if we are serious about non-proliferation, the existing nuclear powers must create a climate of disarmament to reduce the incentive on the part of others to go nuclear.”

But the Pentagon argues that the option of “first use” is needed now more than ever to deter attacks with chemical or biological weapons and, if necessary, to respond to such attacks. This argument is challenged by specialists who emphasize that the effects of using chemical and biological weapons would differ morally, militarily, and politically from those resulting from the use of nuclear weapons. In particular, nuclear attacks on chemical or biological weapons arsenals would cause more environmental contamination than conventional attacks, thus focusing world criticism on the United States rather than on the country accused of planning or staging the chemical or biological attack.

VI.

It was the U.S. deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea in 1957 that
led North Korea to start its nuclear weapons program, and it was their withdrawal in 1991 that opened the way for Kim Jong Il to negotiate the 1994 U.S.-North Korean nuclear freeze agreement, known as the Agreed Framework. As North Korea points out, however, both before and after 1994, the United States has had ICBMs and nuclear-capable cruise missiles in its Pacific submarine fleet, within range of North Korea, together with nuclear-capable aircraft on its Pacific aircraft carriers.

More important, despite its withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons in the South, it has not ruled out their redeployment, nor has it ruled out the right of “first use” against North Korean conventional forces. For this reason, North Korea has repeatedly called for lifting the U.S. nuclear umbrella over the South as a prerequisite for movement toward a nuclear-free peninsula. Pyongyang agreed to the 1994 nuclear freeze only after the United States pledged in Article Three, Section One, of the Agreed Framework, to “provide formal assurances against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States.”

The United States never had to honor that pledge because the Bush administration abrogated the freeze agreement in December 2002, alleging North Korean cheating. In any case, the United States could not have formalized a unilateral pledge of this nature without undermining its implicit commitment, in the U.S.-South Korea Mutual Security Treaty, to use nuclear weapons if necessary in the defense of the South. A unilateral pledge is precluded because China, a nuclear power, still has a security treaty of its own with Pyongyang.

The most feasible way to remove the nuclear umbrella over South Korea would be to do so as part of a six-power agreement to establish a Korean Peninsula Nuclear-Free Zone. The United States, China, Russia, and Japan would rule out the use or deployment of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in Korea. The two Koreas would agree not to develop or deploy such weapons and to permit the international inspection necessary to verify this commitment. Such an agreement is indispensable to the long-term resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. To secure Chinese participation, the United States would have to accept Beijing’s long-standing offer to conclude a bilateral “no first use” agreement.

In South Korea, the withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella would be broadly acceptable because the prospect of using nuclear weapons against their North Korean brethren is deeply repugnant to most South Koreans. In the case of Japan, its withdrawal would intensify what is already a simmering national debate over nuclear weapons. The pacifist anti-nuclear forces argue that the pledge of U.S. nuclear protection makes a Japanese nuclear weapons capability unnecessary. Right-wing hawks centered in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party contend that the U.S. umbrella has lost any credibility it ever had.

Even at the height of the Cold War, a high-level study group convened by Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan’s leading newspaper, had concluded that it would be “highly unthinkable” for the United States to risk a nuclear exchange with Russia or China for the sake of Japan, and, in any case, “there would be little practical meaning” in the destruction of communist cities after “Tokyo and Osaka had been turned into a second Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

Since the end of the Cold War, the Japanese hawks have increasingly questioned the credibility of the umbrella, pointing to Chinese ICBM capabilities that now extend to Los Angeles. The specter of Chinese and North Korean missiles provides the ostensible rationale for a Japanese nuclear weapons capability, but in reality, the hawks are motivated by a nationalistic compulsion to erase the traumas of 1945.

Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are invoked with equal passion by the opponents of nuclear weapons and by their pro-
ponents. Opponents believe that Japan’s unique experience has given it a special responsibility to work for the elimination of nuclear weapons everywhere. Proponents seek to exploit the sublimated feelings of humiliation and impotent rage resulting from their self-image as victims of the world’s only nuclear attack. Only if Japan itself acquires nuclear weapons, they argue, will the nation be able to erase the impact of 1945 from the national psyche and stand up to the United States as an equal.

The long-standing taboo in Japan on openly advocating nuclear weapons is gone. In past years, Liberal Democratic prime ministers have often inadvertently broken the taboo with off-the-record statements that leaked. Prime Minister Eisaku Sato said, “I do not regard it as a complete system of defense if we cannot possess nuclear weapons in the era of nuclear weapons.”21 Yasuhiro Nakasone argued that “purely defensive” nuclear weapons would not violate Article Nine, the U.S.-imposed “No War” clause of the Japanese constitution,22 later echoed by Kakuei Tanaka, who declared that “while we are not able to have offensive nuclear weapons, it is not a question of saying that we will have no nuclear weapons at all.”23

In these cases and others involving lesser officials, the offenders were always forced to recant in the face of attacks from opposition parties. But Ichiro Ozawa, who was elected leader of the opposition Democratic Party in May, has proclaimed that “we have plenty of plutonium in our power plants, so it’s possible for us to produce 3,000 to 4,000 nuclear warheads. If we get serious, we will never be beaten in terms of military power.”24

Japan does indeed have a stockpile of separated plutonium totaling 32.8 tons, enough for 3,900 fission-type nuclear weapons, not to mention spent fuel that would yield another 90 tons of separated plutonium if it were reprocessed, enough for 11,250 nuclear weapons, more than the existing U.S. arsenal. More important, given the technical problems involved in using civilian reactor-grade plutonium for weapons, Tokyo has the sophisticated technology necessary to upgrade reactor-grade plutonium to weapons-grade (through a new laser isotope process), to build new reactors specifically configured for a weapons program, and to convert its Rokasshomura uranium enrichment plant to the production of weapons-grade uranium.

Successive Japanese leaders have consciously designed their civilian nuclear and space programs to facilitate their conversion to the development of nuclear weapons. In Tom Clancy’s 1995 novel, Debt of Honor, Japan makes its own nuclear warheads but has to put them on SS-19 ICBMs purchased from Russia. But the reality now is that Japan would not have to rely on any other power for missile technology. With U.S. assistance during the Cold War years, including help in sensitive areas such as guidance and re-entry technology, Japan has built up its own space capabilities and has successfully tested two solid-fueled rocket systems that could be readily converted to ICBMs. Both of these systems, the J-1 and M-5, have a payload and thrust comparable to the most advanced U.S. missiles.

What would it take to stop the increasing erosion of the popular consensus against a Japanese nuclear weapons program? First, the creation of a Korean Peninsula Nuclear-Free Zone, and second, visible global progress toward phasing out and delegitimizing nuclear weapons. Even if a six-party Korea denuclearization agreement can be concluded, however, the pro-nuclear hawks could still point to a Chinese threat, unless the United States agrees to support the creation of a broader Northeast Asia Nuclear-Free Zone. Pending such a shift in U.S. policy, the continuation of the nominal U.S. nuclear umbrella over Japan would be helpful to the anti-nuclear movement, even though the umbrella’s significance is largely symbolic.
As an example of how a Northeast Asia Nuclear-Free Zone could be implemented, Kumao Kaneko, former director of the Nuclear Energy Division in the Japanese Foreign Ministry, has proposed that such a zone encompass a circular area with a 2,000-kilometer radius from the central point at Panmunjom in Korea. Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan, and Mongolia would join in a treaty commitment not to make or acquire nuclear weapons or to permit them on their territory. China, Russia, and the United States would be asked to sign protocols affirming “respect” for the accord and pledging explicitly not to deploy or test nuclear weapons within the treaty zone or to attack any of the five non-nuclear signatories with nuclear weapons.25

This was the formula adopted in the nuclear-free zone agreement concluded by ten Southeast Asian nations in December 1995, but the United States has refused to sign such a protocol, thus blocking implementation of the Southeast Asian accord. The United States wants assurances that the Southeast Asian treaty would not impede the transit of nuclear-armed ships or submarines. China said in 2004 that it would sign a protocol affirming its “respect” for the Southeast Asian treaty, but has not yet done so.

Most proposals for a Northeast Asia Nuclear-Free Zone envisage the exclusion of Beijing’s DF-3 and DF-4 intermediate range missiles from parts of east and northeast China within striking distance of Japan, but Beijing has rejected such proposals. China argues that it would need maximum tactical flexibility in the event of a war over Taiwan and points to U.S. and Russian nuclear deployments in the Pacific as the basic justification for its own nuclear deployments. Chinese agreement to include parts of its territory in the zone would require explicit U.S. and Russian commitments to remove nuclear deployments from the zone; a U.S. pledge to keep out of any war over Taiwan; and agreed limits on the character and coverage of any U.S.–Japan Theater Missile Defense system.

In the Middle East–Persian Gulf region, as in Northeast Asia, there is widespread latent support for a nuclear weapons-free zone. Iran first proposed such a zone in 1974, and Egypt and Saudi Arabia have since pushed the idea vigorously. But strong U.S. support would be necessary in both cases to get serious negotiations started. Israel has remained silent concerning its nuclear weapons capabilities, partly at the request of the United States, and would come out in the open only with U.S. approval. If it is not prepared to do so and resists the regional security tradeoffs necessary to defuse the Iran crisis, Saudi Arabia has suggested the possibility of a zone limited to the Gulf region as a desirable first step.

For the immediate future, given political realities in Washington and many of the other capitals concerned, there is little prospect of sustained progress toward a new nuclear bargain that would reduce nuclear weapons and delegitimize them through measures like nuclear-free zones. The best that can be expected is that the United States will abandon its “regime change” illusions and buy time by negotiating freeze agreements with North Korea and Iran, linked to regional security trade-offs and economic incentives. But looking further ahead, the stark choice facing the international community will become increasingly clear and compelling: honor Article Six, or learn to live with a continuing erosion of the non-proliferation regime and the emergence of new nuclear weapon states, big and small. ●

Notes
8. Paul Lettow, in Ronald Reagan and the Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (New York: Random House, 2006), shows that Reagan’s advisers, with the exception of Secretary of State George Shultz, were “terrified” at the idea of a complete elimination. Led by Richard Perle, they had obtained Reagan’s tacit approval of a plan to restrict the 10-year phaseout to intercontinental missiles, which would have permitted the deployment of nuclear-armed bombers and cruise missiles, a distinction in which Reagan “did not seem interested.” In any case, the missile defense negotiations were already stalemated over the missile defense issue. See pp. 217–248, esp. pp. 222–24 and 232–34.
11. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations, Joint Publication 3-12, Final Coordination (2), March 15, 2005.